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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAO](#) [PTER](#) [BA](#) [IZ](#) [REGION](#) [POL](#)

SUBJECT: BAHRAIN REACTS TO SECTARIAN VIOLENCE IN IRAQ

REF: STATE 28802

Classified by DCM Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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1. (C) Tens of thousands of Bahrainis, mostly Shias, participated in peaceful and orderly demonstrations over the weekend protesting the attack on the Imam Al Hadi Shrine in Samarra. Officials, politicians, and religious leaders denounced the Samarra bombing and revenge attacks on Sunni targets. The Cabinet issued a statement February 26 calling on Iraqis to exercise self-restraint, and politicians and political societies condemned sectarianism. In their Friday prayer sermons on February 24, clerics called for Muslim unity and some wondered about whether there is an American or Israeli hand in the violence. Columnists went in several directions: some called for increased efforts to overcome sectarianism, others blamed Sunnis for not condemning previous violence, and Baathists blamed the United States for creating the conditions for the strife to occur. The trend by some in Sunni and Shia quarters to lay blame on the United States, which echoes similar statements in Iraq, bears watching. End Summary.

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Tens of Thousands Participate in Peaceful Rallies  
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2. (U) Bahrainis, mostly Shias, participated in peaceful and orderly demonstrations across the country February 22-24 to condemn the February 22 attack on the Imam Al Hadi Shrine in Samarra. Protests took place in Manama, Muharraq, Sitra, Sanabis, Daih, Diraz, and Karanah. The largest rally, with some 20,000 participants (according to a reliable source), took place after Friday prayers February 24 and closed streets and highways between the village of Qadam and the Seef commercial district.

3. (U) Islamic Clerics Council Chair Shaikh Issa Qassem, Bahrain's most influential Shia cleric, led the procession and called for those carrying out terrorist activities in the name of Islam to be punished. He accused the perpetrators of seeking to sow divisions between Muslims. He told the participants, "Those who claim to have done this in the name of Islam are non-believers, seeking to destroy the image of Muslims the world over. Muslim brothers' blood, money and dignity should always be protected and any Muslim who harms another is not a Muslim and should be treated as an infidel. Sunnis or Shias, we are gathered here today to show that Islam stands for tolerance and love for one another." He called for all Iraqis to unite and to stop incitement. Marchers carried signs with photos of the destroyed shrine saying "No to Sectarian Sedition" and "This is What the Followers of Yazeed Do," a reference to the army that killed Imam Hussein and his followers in 680 AD at the battle of Kerbala.

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Government, Officials Condemn Violence  
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4. (U) Government officials, parliamentarians, political societies, religious leaders, and columnists denounced the violence in Iraq. The Cabinet issued a statement February 26 criticizing both the Samarra bombing and the attacks on Sunni mosques and called for Iraqis to act with self-restraint to calm the situation. Interior Minister Shaikh Rashid bin Abdulla Al Khalifa February 23 told the press that the bombing of the shrine is a "criminal act of incitement" that Iraqis should resist. The elected Council of Representatives (COR) called on the Iraqi people, religious scholars, and national leaders to remain calm and avoid violence that could result in sectarian conflict. "A unified Iraq is everyone's goal and (the bombing) is an obstacle we hope the Iraqis will overcome." Iraqi Ambassador to Bahrain Ghassan Mohsin said the attack would not harm national unity or the political process in his country. He lauded the stance and support of the Bahraini people.

15. (C) Foreign Minister Shaikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa told the Ambassador February 26 that the government felt it was important for senior religious leaders to step up and take public positions against violence and sectarian strife. He noted that the GCC foreign ministers had issued a statement condemning the violence in Iraq.

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Politicians Denounce Sectarianism  
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16. (U) Both Sunni and Shia political groups have weighed in. President of the Sunni Al Minbar Islamic Society Dr. Salah Ali criticized the perpetrators of the bombing, saying they want to destroy the unity of the Iraqi people and ruin peaceful coexistence of the different sects. He termed the bombing "offensive to Islam and all Muslims." The COR's Shia Islamic bloc slammed the "takfeeri" (jihadist) mentality that is at the heart of terrorism. It called for national unity and not allowing Sunnis to suffer for the acts of terrorists. The hardline Shia Haq Movement said actions and words that incite sectarianism should be considered criminal acts. A Haq spokesman said his group would soon launch a campaign titled, "Together Against Sectarianism and Takfeeri School of Thought." University of Bahrain students are holding a rally February 27 to condemn the attack and reject sectarian incitement.

17. (U) Other political groups see an American hand in the violence. The secular socialist Al Waad issued a statement holding "the occupation forces" responsible for the attack. In a joint statement, two Sunni groups, Al Wasat Al Arabi Society and the National Democratic Grouping Society, claimed the incident was orchestrated by the United States. The statement read, "The enemy is trying to divide the people of Iraq... but Iraqis are aware of this conspiracy" and that knowledge has brought them closer together.

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Clerics Address Violence  
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18. (U) The Iraq violence was a universal subject in the Friday prayer sermons of February 24. Shia Shaikh Issa Qassem said that anyone who claims the right to kill others and bomb holy places also gives others the right to do the same to him. He accused the "triangle of pessimism," America, Israel, and the jihadists, of carrying out the attack. Shaikh Ali Salman, president of leading Shia political society Al Wifaq, said he had received many phone calls from Sunni leaders rejecting the attack. He asserted that the main beneficiaries of the situation are "the Zionists," regardless of who actually carried out the bombing. Sunni clerics Shaikh Juma Tawfeeq, Shaikh Abdul Nasser Al Mahmood, and Shaikh Salah Al Jowder called on Muslims to unite against those who seek to divide them. The Shia Jaafari Awqaf Endowment, Sunni Islamic Society, and the mixed Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs all issued statements denouncing the bombing and calling for unity.

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Columnists Offer Diverse Analyses  
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19. (U) Columnists have interpreted events in various ways. Sayed Dhiya Al Mousawi of Al Wasat and Abbas Bu Safwan of Al Ayam take the high road, calling for extraordinary efforts to help Iraqis get beyond the spasm of violence and to avoid spillover into Bahrain. Al Mousawi says, "We have lived as Sunni and Shia in this country for many years and we will continue to do so as long as we work together to extinguish the sectarian flames that are heading toward us from Iraq. We must help Iraq jump over the sectarian hole instead of helping it jump into it." Bu Safwan writes, "Nobody can deny the influence of what is happening in Iraq on Bahrain. I call for a national gathering attended by the religious leadership that will cut off the division faction and send a strong message reaffirming that harming national unity is a red line."

110. (U) Sawsan Al Shaer of Al Watan, herself a Sunni, criticizes the reaction of her co-religionists, saying, "Now you are counting the number of Sunni corpses in Iraq? Why haven't you counted all the corpses that have fallen in Iraq for years? Is it because you have a double standard and you were looking at whether they were Sunni or Shia? Nobody denies the self-restraint Shias have shown so far and how much wisdom Al Sistani has shown over the years... We have warned you repeatedly from discriminating between the souls of the victims... You can accuse whoever you want but you will never be able to erase your fingerprints on the crime of incitement in Iraq."

111. (U) The pan-Arabist and Baathist writers lay the blame on the United States. Abdulla Al Ayoobi, Radhi Al Sammak, and Mohammed Kadem Al Shehabi, all from Akhbar Al Khaleej, say the American occupation created the conditions for the

bombing and believe that the end of the occupation is the only way to salvage Iraq's unity and stability. Abdul Menem Ibrahim, also of Akhbar Al Khaleej, writes that the Gulf region is "paying the price of American mistakes in Iraq. Since Iraq was torn apart between sects, ethnicities, and religions, all we have seen is more extremism and religious radicalism. Whenever the situation in Iraq gets more insane, we in Bahrain must get more rational and adhere to our national unity."

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Comment  
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112. (C) As the only other Arab state with a Shia majority, Bahrain is directly impacted by events in Iraq. To their credit, most officials, politicians, and clerics are calling for unity and stability in the face of unprecedented violence in Iraq. However, as has happened in Iraq itself, some blame the United States for creating the conditions that led to the attacks, a trend we will continue to track.

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